DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 072 845 PS 006 207

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TITLE	Violent Content in Television: Effect of Cognitive Style and Age in Mediating Children's Aggressive Responses.
PUB DATE	72
NOTE	2p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (80th, Honolulu, Hawaii, September 2-3, 1972)
AVAILABLE FROM	American Psychological Association, 1200 17th Street, Washington, D. C. 20036 (no price quoted)
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.65 HC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	*Age Differences; *Aggression; Analysis of Variance; *Cognitive Development; Elementary School Students; Environmental Influences; Kindergarten Children; *Males; Measurement Techniques; Nonverbal Tests; Social Influences; Technical Reports; *Television Research
IDENTIFIERS	Kagans Matching Familiar Figures Test; Maccobys Draw A Line Slowly Test; Witkins Rod and Frame Test

ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to investigate the impact certain cognitive styles or structures have in mediating the influence of aggressive television on young boys. Ss were 143 white middle class boys: 36 were 5 1/2-year-old kindergarteners; 30 were 6 1/2-year-old first graders; 36 were 7 1/2-year-old second graders; and 41 were 8 1/2-year-old third graders. One-third of the Ss at each age level were exposed to an experimental condition of a 6-minute aggressive TV film; one-third were exposed to an experimental condition of a 6-minute nonaggressive film; and one-third were assigned to a no-film control group. Following exposure, an aggression measure was obtained in the guise of a guessing game played with an experimenter acting as a confederate. Each S was given the option of exposing the confederate to a noxious noise whenever he made an incorrect guess. Analyses of variance revealed that: (1) the statistically reliable differences in aggression between the experimental film conditions were attributable to differences among the 6 1/2- and 7 1/2-year-old Ss; (2) younger children were significantly more aggressive than the older; and (3) the level of cognitive functioning was more differentiated, organized, elaborated and articulated as a function of maturity. Results support the premise that the effect of TV exposure depends not only on the content but also on the child's cognitive style and way of responding to the environment in general. (KM)

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Reprinted from the Proceedings, 80th Annual Convention, APA, 1972

VIOLENT CONTENT IN TELEVISION: EFFECT OF COGNITIVE STYLE AND AGE IN MEDIATING CHILDREN'S AGGRESSIVE RESPONSES

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ED 072845

The problem of assessing the influence of the mass media, in particular television, upon the aggressive attitudes and behavior of children has been a matter of increasing public concern. Although there has been considerable research conducted in relation to this issue, the evidence concerning the aggression-stimulating and aggression-reducing effects of exposing children to violent mass media content is conflicting, the results being dependent upon a number of stimulus, situational, and population parameters.

Thus far, it has been exceedingly difficult to demonstrate, empirically, that the violence presented in television is responsible for the development of aggressive behavior in children. The nature of the functional relationship between television and aggression has been and continues to be the subject of considerable controversy and sharp disagreement (Feshbach & Singer, 1970). One argument in this controversy has been that exposing children to violence in the media stimulates and reinforces aggression by providing aggressive-role models for imitation and by facilitating the acceptance of violence as an appropriate way of solving social and personal problems (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961; Lovaas, 1961). According to this view, the mass media are seen as contributing to social unrest, crime, warfare, and other forms of aggressive expression.

An opposing viewpoint has been that exposure to the presentation of violence in the media does not necessarily lead to an increase in aggressive behavior. Instead, according to this view, exposure to violent content, and in particular to aggressive fantasy content in television, may serve to reduce and control the expression of aggression in children (Feshbach, 1970). From this perspective, it has been proposed that exposure to the depiction of violence in the media permits children to discharge vicariously, in fantasy, aggressive impulses that might otherwise appear as overt behavioral responses.

In an effort to resolve the conflicting evidence in the literature, an analysis of the individual differences in cognitive functioning which could mediate the influence of television content on aggression was undertaken. The purpose of the study, therefore, was to investigate the impact which certain cognitive styles or structures have in mediating the influence of aggressive television on young boys. The primary intent of the study was not to gain information in regard to the long-term cumulative effects of the continued exposure of children to televised violence; rather, it was to provide information in regard to the immediate, direct, and specific effects of exposing children with varying cognitive predispositions and perceptual modes to violent content in television.

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Design

Three cognitive style measures were employed to investigate the effect of differences in preferred strategies for perceptual analysis in mediating exposure to aggressive television. The selected measures included (*a*) a modification of Witkin's Rod and Frame Test (RFT) measuring field independence - dependence; (*b*) Kagan's Matching Familiar Figures Test (MFF) measuring reflection - impulsivity; and (*c*) Maccoby's Draw-A-Line-Slowly Test (DALS) measuring motoric inhibition - impulsivity.

In order to determine the effects of age differences in regard to cognitive style and aggression, *S*s were drawn from four age levels (5½, 6½, 7½, and 8½ yr.).

To assess the effects of exposure to variations in television film content, one-third of the *S*s at each age level were exposed to an experimental condition of a 6-min. aggressive TV film (videotape), one-third were exposed to an experimental condition of a 6-min. nonaggressive film, and one-third were assigned to a no-film control group. Following this exposure, the measure of aggression was obtained.

The hypotheses were these:

1. For the older boys, the 7½- and 8½-year-olds, the more differentiated, organized, and articulated the level of cognitive functioning, the *less* would be the impact of variations in the experimental film condition.
2. For the younger boys, the 5½- and 6½-year-olds, the more differentiated, organized, and articulated the level of cognitive functioning, the *greater* would be the impact of the variations in the experimental film condition.
3. The level of cognitive functioning would be more differentiated, more elaborated, and articulated as a function of maturity.
4. The level of aggression would be a function of the age of the child, with the younger children being more aggressive than the older.

METHOD

Subjects

The *S*s were 143 white middle-class boys enrolled in a public school in the Santa Monica area. Of the total number, 36 were 5½-year-old kindergarteners; 30 were 6½-year-old first graders; 36 were 7½-year-old second graders, and 41 were 8½-year-old third graders. The *S*s were selected and assigned to one of the three experimental conditions in a randomized order from those available in the four classrooms at each grade level.

Procedure

During the first of the two short experimental sessions, each child was administered the RFT, the MFF and the DALS. During the second session, the experimental *S*s were exposed to one of two experimental conditions, an aggressive TV film or a nonaggressive TV film. The control *S*s saw no film. Following exposure to the film for the experimental *S*s, an aggression measure was obtained in the guise of a guessing game played with a second *E* (male) who acted as a confederate. During the "game," each *S* was given the option of exposing the confederate to a very

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noxious noise via a modification of the Buss (1961) "aggression machine" whenever he made an incorrect guess. The frequency with which the *S* administered the most noxious noise to the confederate constituted the dependent measure of aggression.

RESULTS

In order to assess the effects of the cognitive style variables and age in mediating the impact of the aggressive and nonaggressive television films upon the children's aggressive behavior, a series of five 2 × 3 × 4 analyses of variance was carried out. The first analysis dealt with the effects of the field independence - dependence cognitive style dimension. The second, third, and fourth analyses dealt with the three aspects of the reflection - impulsivity dimension (errors, latencies, and errors/latencies combined). The fifth analysis dealt with the motoric inhibition - impulsivity cognitive style dimension. Each of the three-way analyses of variance included two levels of cognitive functioning, three experimental film conditions, and four levels of age. The results of these analyses provided the data bearing on Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3.

In summary, the major findings regarding the main experimental effects were as follows:

Hypothesis 1. The data for the 7½-year-olds provided consistent support for the first hypothesis. This support was evidenced by the fact that for the older boys, all of the statistically reliable differences in aggression between the experimental film conditions were attributable to differences among the 7½-year-old cognitively immature boys.

Hypothesis 2. The data for the younger children did not support the expectation of the second hypothesis. Instead, the data for the 6½-year-olds were in direct opposition to the prediction. These results indicated for younger children, that all but one of the statistically reliable differences in aggression between the experimental film conditions were attributable to differences among the 6½-year-old boys with the less differentiated cognitive styles. It is of interest to note that these findings were very similar to those for the older 7½-year-old boys.

Hypothesis 3. The data bearing on Hypothesis 3 provided substantial support, with several minor exceptions, for the expectation that the younger children would be significantly more aggressive than the older.

Hypothesis 4. In order to determine whether there were significant developmental changes along the three cognitive style dimensions, a series of four one-way analyses of variance was carried out. The results of these analyses indicated, in support of Hypothesis 4, that on all three cognitive style dimensions, the level of cognitive functioning was more differentiated, more organized, elaborated, and more articulated as a function of maturity.

DISCUSSION

The results of this investigation provide empirical support for the major premise that the effect which exposure to television has upon a child depends not only on the nature of the content but also upon the child's individual cognitive style and the way in which he responds to the environment in general. The data for the 6½- and 7½-year-olds are particularly consistent with the general theoretical expectation that the less cognitively organized and differentiated children are, the more subject they are to the influence of stimulation such as television provides.

These findings also pertain directly to the question of the functional relationship between the presentation of violence in the media and its influence upon the aggressive attitudes and behaviors of boys. The results indicate that the cognitively immature children who viewed the aggressive TV film were significantly less aggressive than those who saw either the nonaggressive TV film or no film at all. The findings suggest that among children who have relatively undifferentiated, immature, cognitive styles, exposure to aggressive television content leads to a reduction in aggressive activity. One interpretation of these results is that the viewing of aggressive television content provides a form of cognitive support to children who are low in internal cognitive resources. Such an interpretation is in agreement with the cognitive support hypothesis proposed by Feshbach (1970). The cognitive support hypothesis proposes that exposure to aggressive television may serve to modulate or control the expression of aggressive impulses in boys who are lacking in certain cognitive resources, such as the abilities to ideate, to imagine and fantasize, to rehearse and elaborate responses, and to control, by discharging vicariously in fantasy, impulses and energy that might otherwise be acted out in overt behavior. Feshbach suggests that the cognitive activity of fantasy, whether in the form of thoughts, dreams, stories or daydreams may enable individuals to deal with and control the immediate expression of impulse. According to this theory, exposure to aggressive fantasy content in the media provides the cognitively immature child with the ideation and stimulation to fantasy activity which he does not have readily available within himself. The child with a highly differentiated cognitive style may have other ideational resources besides the immediate stimulation provided by the television. Therefore, he will probably not be as affected by the immediate influence of the aggressive media content to which he is exposed. The child with the less differentiated cognitive style, on the other hand, may be engaging in ideational fantasy activity only when viewing television. This interpretation would account for the greater effect of the media on children with such cognitive styles.

The absence of a significant influence of aggressive television content upon the more cognitively differentiated boys and the dependence of the aggression-reducing effect upon a particular level of cognitive structure indicates to some extent why there are conflicting findings in the literature. Most studies in this area have not taken cognitive style and related individual difference variables into account.

The results of this study also indicate that there are differences in the nature of the children's responses to television which are related to differences in levels of cognitive organization rather than to chronological age.

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